

Community Children's Center  
797 Mansfield City Road, Storrs, CT 06268

March 10, 2015

Human Services Committee  
Ct State Legislature  
Hartford, CT

Members of the Committee:

My name is Lisa Dahn and I am the executive director at Community Children's Center (CCC), a non-profit early care and education center in Storrs. We serve kids ages 18 months through 5 and their families. We are a School Readiness (SR) site.

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I am writing in support of raised bill # 1044. This bill is a good beginning as we look carefully at how we can address the issue of worthy wages for child care professionals. SR sites are required to be high quality in a number of ways: they must be NAEYC accredited, be fluent in the CT Early Learning and Development Standards (CTELDS), and have teachers who hold bachelor's degrees to name a few. The issue I wish to expand upon here is wages.

At CCC we rely on our teachers and our assistants to bring their best selves to the service of the children and their families. This means that they offer a developmentally appropriate responsive (often individualized) curriculum in an engaging and inspired environment. And on top of this they provide excellent, warm and nurturing care to our young charges. They are dedicated professionals. They love their work and know its worth. And they all receive meager hourly wages. Why? Because that is what it takes to deliver high quality care in the state of Connecticut...low teacher wages. Notice, I am not saying salary, I am saying hourly wages.

Many of our staff have worked here for decades. They do so because they love the work and feel professionally fulfilled and challenged by it. Sadly by devoting their professional working lives here, they have put their long term financial viability at risk. Our current teacher and assistant wages range from \$9.25 – \$13.75/hour. We have no retirement plan to contribute to, and we cannot afford to cover even half of the cost health insurance for our teachers.

So what do we do? We make due. And usually we manage. But any of life's events can throw us out of financial balance: illness, car repairs, taxes, just to name a few.

I am a case in point, and I am one of the lucky ones. I have worked at CCC since 1991, starting as a teacher and becoming director in 1992. My husband owns his own business; my income has mainly been supplementary; our family's health insurance is through him. Enter 2008 recession: his business was hit hard, his salary now is roughly ¼ of what it was. Simultaneously, CCC went through financial difficulties and wages were frozen, paid time off was reduced, and my wages were deferred. Luckily, our mortgage is paid, unluckily we were relying heavily on the sale of my husband's business to fund our retirement. Luckily we are hardy Yankees who can still work, unluckily we are getting older and some of our parts are wearing out. Luckily, his business is climbing out of the tank. Maybe we will be OK without relying on social services to keep us viable; but it has been very close. We had many paydays without pay. Neither of us was eligible for unemployment. We were and are very close to the edge, shameful, as I have devoted my career to creating and maintaining high quality centers for the children of CT and mentoring students entering the Early Childhood (EC) profession.

Another case:

One of our assistant teachers, a widow, lives with a disabled child. To make ends meet she has to decide which bills to pay. She has faced the threat of foreclosure and post breast cancer followup without health insurance, to name just 2 stressors. She regularly arranges her break so she can meet the local Foodshare van to supplement groceries; shameful, as someone who has devoted her career to the Early Childhood profession.

**Why do we care?** Being out of balance financially leads to emotional stress which research has shown impacts worker and program quality. The domino effect of stressed and distracted teachers impacts the children and the programs we strive to support.

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**What can we do?** Use every resource and every creative solution to find the funds to elevate the wages of EC professionals to a liveable, sustainable level. Thank goodness we are far beyond needing to justify our work as teachers; we are no longer looked upon as babysitters. Society needs fully engaged, healthy, well-educated and well paid early childhood professionals to support the development of the children of the working families in our state and in our country.

Governor Malloy knows this. He created the OEC to tend it.

President O'Bama knows this. In December 2014 he introduced a 'Playbook for Becoming an Early Learning Community', whereby he addresses ways for states and municipalities to support EC programs.

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We all know this. **Let's work together to address this problem.** Bill #1044 is a good starting place. Perhaps moving the social service monies it costs to keep working teachers afloat could be used to fund wages.

In conjunction with Human Services Committee perhaps the Education Committee will be able to offer a creative solution to address the pay inequities between the public and community based preschool programs. Both are needed to reach our goal of providing universal preschool in CT.

Thank you for your efforts on our behalf.

Lisa Dahn  
Executive Director